

Overcoming All Odds
College of Engineering Technology
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David L. Eisler, President

For every student who crosses our stage today there is a story, a story that includes people that supported and encouraged them, teachers on all levels that have educated, challenged, and prepared them, and personal commitment, effort, and sacrifice that has helped transform them. In the success, triumphs, and achievements of these graduates we see our hopes and dreams for the future, a future that is bright and promising and filled with opportunities that are yet to be discovered.

Over the past few weeks I have taken time to visit with our graduates, learning about their experiences and hearing their stories. As I have listened, I have developed an even deeper appreciation of the students we have at Ferris State University and their determination to overcome all odds to earn their degree. For many of us here today the pathway to a college degree was direct and straight forward. For others there have been significant challenges along the way. I'm hopeful you can appreciate the stories of two graduates here today who truly have triumphed in this context.

In 1993 this young man's parents began to collect 55 gallon drums. The next year, when he was 9, his father lashed these drums together, creating a 30 foot raft, attached a small motor, and their family fled Cuba, seeking a new life in the United States. After being out to sea for 38 hours they reached land and were among the last allowed to stay in this country. People who arrived even as little as one day later were turned away or sent back. He and his family were placed in a detention center for a month with 1500 others, where this young boy did not see his father for two weeks. Released to his father's cousins, they began the struggle to build a new life in their new country. As he describes it, "Even though we were poor, we went from having nothing to having everything."

As a young man he did not distinguish himself as a high school student. He decided to become a repair technician, working first at a Lexus dealership and then for a heavy equipment dealer, Kelly Tractor. This employer together with the Caterpillar Company had an agreement with South Georgia Technical College in Americus, Georgia, where they would pay for his studies. Graduating with an associate applied science degree, he realized that he wanted more for his future and

sought a bachelor program he could attend. Ferris State University was the one college that would accept his credits.

Together with two others from his program in Georgia, he arrived in the fall of 2007. He describes his first semester as the hardest, but he was here to study, to work and to do his best, so he applied himself and today graduates in four semesters at Ferris. His story is a compelling one, escaping oppression and building success in a land of opportunity, in many respects the American dream.

Today his father is a successful businessman, his mother is an accountant, and he graduates with his bachelor degree in automotive management. Tomorrow he'll drive to Anderson, Indiana and on Monday he'll begin his new position with Cummings Diesel.

It is a pleasure to introduce you to a remarkable young man, Robert Bustamante. I would ask that he stand to be recognized. I would also ask that his parents and family stand.

Our second student grew up in Lyon, Illinois just beyond the westside of Chicago. A first generation college student, he attended a 4,500 student high school where there were few expectations he would attend college. He went to Morton Community College, where in his words, he lacked direction but did pretty well, especially in HVAC. He graduated with his associates degree prepared to be a service technician and went to work. It was soon clear that he wanted something more challenging and more rewarding. He looked for a bachelor's program in business, but heard of the bachelor's degree in HVAC at Ferris State University and enrolled.

When he arrived at Ferris for fall semester 2005 it was his first time away from home and Big Rapids was a very different place. It was clear that Ferris had the best equipment and the best professors and he feared he would be at a disadvantage. In those first few weeks he soon learned that he was as smart as anyone and that he was going to do well in school. However in late September and early October he became sick and did not improve. He drove back to Chicago, was in the hospital for two weeks, and learned he either had HIV, lymphoma, or leukemia. The diagnosis was Stage 4 Hodgkin's lymphoma. He was forced to withdraw that first semester and began chemotherapy in November, followed up by radiation.

In late August of 2006 he checked again on Ferris, discovered classes were starting and decided to return. He came back to school a year behind his friends, but with something to prove. Even though he was feeling good and happy to be healthy, he drove back to Chicago every two weeks for tests. During Christmas break he learned that his lymphoma had returned and spread throughout his body. He withdrew again to fight the disease.

What he needed was a stem cell bone marrow transplant, but he could not afford the surgery and Medicaid would not cover it. For four months doctors kept his cancer from spreading with chemotherapy. Finally the surgery was approved and his own stem cells were harvested and reinserted into his body. This is a difficult and challenging process where infection and complications are a constant struggle. While he was healing he discovered that the number of visitors at his bed kept increasing. What he learned was that his family had spoken of him in the waiting room and others wanted to meet him. Eventually he began going down to see people in the waiting room because of the numbers.

Finally on August 23rd, 2007, 100 days after his surgery, he received the wonderful news that he was cancer free. He had already taken the first year fall semester classes here and used this term as a victory lap, going to thank and celebrate with his family and friends who had visited him in the hospital, travelling to Texas, Mexico, and California. Spring 2008 he returned to Ferris, doing well, making the dean's list.

During fall semester the tissue masses in his chest were growing. January 2009 brought more tests and it was decided to do a biopsy immediately after spring break this March. Waking up after the procedure he discovered that instead of a small incision, he had one that was much, much larger. The lymphoma had returned, a tumor had been removed, and he needed another stem cell transplant this time with donor cells.

For this student there have been two priorities throughout – first to be healthy and second to finish his degree. Talking with his doctor he decided to delay this surgery so he could complete his degree today. Despite missing three weeks of classes he returned to school and today graduates with honors in just four semesters of study. But his story has not just been one of academics. On campus he serves as president of the Hispanic Students Organization and helps promote the university at College Fairs, High School visits and student panels.

It is my privilege to meet many students, but I cannot remember anyone with such an overwhelming positive attitude. He has not just overcome huge obstacles in order to finish college, he also helped present college and the benefits of higher education to young students from similar backgrounds to his own. He is a superb example that they CAN beat the odds, and can go to college despite all the challenges they may face.

It is my honor to present to you an extraordinary human being, Gustavo Chavez. I would ask that he stand and be recognized. I would ask that his family also stand. Know that you will be in my thoughts and prayers as you face the challenges ahead. Please include Big Rapids when you make your next victory lap.

Robert and Gustavo, you are inspirations to each of us. Many of us take for granted what you have had to work so very, very hard to accomplish. The importance you have placed on education reminds each of us of its transformative power.

Graduates, on behalf of our university I wish you great success, meaning and fulfillment. As each of you sets out on the next step on your life and career you will face times of challenge, heartbreak, and disappointment. In those times when you might consider giving up, I'd encourage you to remember the examples of Robert Bustamante and Gustavo Chavez and their indefatigable determination to overcome all odds.

Congratulations and best wishes, Class of 2009.